

From Pages to Pictures: Using Motivation, Differentiation and Drawing to Deepen Comprehension

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salary increase, teaching and learning focused, performance-based promotion, Teaching Excellence Framework, state universities, faculty ranking, faculty promotion, education, political economy

Abstract. This classroom action research responds to the alarming decline in Filipino students' literacy, as highlighted in the EDCOM II report (2026), which shows a steep drop in proficiency from 30.52% in Grade 3 to only 0.47% by Grade 12. Complementary data from the Philippine Statistics Authority (2025) further indicate that only 70.8% of Filipinos aged 10–64 are functionally literate, revealing persistent challenges in comprehension despite basic reading skills. These findings underscore the need for instructional interventions that address both reading competence and motivation. Drawing on theories of reading motivation and metacognition, this study examines how learner engagement in text selection and differentiated reading tasks can enhance comprehension and reflective thinking. Reading motivation is framed as a multidimensional construct involving affective, cognitive, and intentional components, while metacognition emphasizes learners' awareness and regulation of their own thinking processes. The intervention integrates student choice and structured, differentiated activities that guide learners from literal understanding to critical application. By encouraging students to monitor their comprehension, adjust strategies, and reflect on their interpretations, the study promotes “constructively responsive reading.” Findings suggest that when learners actively participate in the reading process, they develop deeper textual engagement, improved comprehension, and heightened awareness of their learning strategies over time.

Introduction

The need to revisit the instructional approach emerged from a situational needs analysis, which led to the administration of a diagnostic reading test. This step was necessary to identify the gap between the initially planned instruction and the students' actual reading abilities. While preliminary classroom observations suggested that learners could engage with selected texts centered on love and relationships, the diagnostic results offered a more nuanced picture of their reading readiness.

Findings revealed that most of the 11 respondents fell within the approaching proficiency to proficient range. However, persistent difficulties were noted in vocabulary, comprehension, and higher-order reading skills. In particular, unfamiliar vocabulary and lengthy texts posed significant challenges for several students. At the same time, survey responses indicated that learners showed greater motivation toward light, relatable, and contemporary materials, such as romance stories, Wattpad texts, and comics—suggesting that emotional relevance plays a key role in sustaining engagement.

These insights highlighted a mismatch between assumed and actual learner needs. Although thematic relevance initially appeared sufficient to support comprehension, the results underscored varying levels of reading ability within the class. Consequently, the case problem centers on how to design instruction that accommodates diverse proficiency levels while maintaining student engagement. Addressing this issue required a shift toward a more responsive and differentiated approach to reading instruction.

The instructional approach adopted in this study is grounded in theories of intrinsic motivation and cognitive learning, which emphasize the role of personal engagement in meaningful reading. Scholars have long observed that learners differ in how they process and respond to texts—some easily derive meaning and sustain interest, while others struggle despite exposure to the same material. These differences highlight the importance of intrinsic motivation, defined as engaging in an activity for the inherent satisfaction it provides rather than for external rewards (Cherry, 2026). In the context of reading, intrinsic motivation enables learners to view comprehension as a rewarding process, encouraging deeper engagement, critical thinking, and persistence.

This perspective is further supported by the work of Richard Ryan and Edward Deci (2017), whose self-determination theory explains that motivation is influenced by the fulfillment of basic psychological needs—autonomy, competence, and relatedness. When these needs are supported, learners are more likely to develop sustained interest and ownership of their learning. However, in many classroom settings, reading is often task-driven and externally imposed, limiting students' autonomy and reducing opportunities for meaningful choice. As a result, motivation may shift from genuine interest to compliance, which can hinder deep comprehension and long-term engagement.

Within this framework, intrinsic motivation is viewed as a foundational element in the development of functional literacy. While everyday reading tasks may not always evoke emotional engagement, they still require active meaning-making, attention, and interpretation. Learners who are intrinsically motivated are better equipped to approach texts purposefully, construct meaning, and apply their understanding across contexts. Thus, fostering intrinsic motivation is essential not only for improving reading comprehension but also for developing the practical literacy skills necessary for academic success and real-world functioning.

Methodology

A. The Locale

This classroom action research was conducted in a small, college-level setting at Our Lady of Manaoag Montessori College, involving a purposively selected group of approximately 11 Hospitality and Restaurant Management (HRM) students aged 19 to 22. The participants represented a range of reading abilities, reflecting varying levels of proficiency, confidence, and engagement with texts. This diversity in skill level provided a relevant context for examining how differentiated and structured reading activities could address individual learning needs.

The study was implemented within a regular classroom environment, allowing the intervention to be embedded in authentic instructional practice. Guided by the Plan-Act-Observe-Reflect (PAOR) cycle, the research emphasized continuous improvement of teaching strategies based on observed student responses.

Overall, the setting and participants offered a focused yet dynamic environment for exploring how targeted instructional adjustments can enhance reading engagement and skill development among tertiary-level learners.

B. The Intervention

Over the course of six weeks, this classroom action research traced the evolving reading behaviors, challenges, and progress of the participants, revealing both persistent gaps and meaningful gains. At the outset, students demonstrated strong interest in self-selected and contemporary materials; however, this engagement did not consistently translate into comprehension. Difficulties in vocabulary, identifying themes, and making inferences became immediately evident, highlighting a gap between motivation and actual reading proficiency.

The diagnostic phase confirmed these initial observations, showing that while most learners were at the approaching proficiency to proficient levels, many struggled with deeper comprehension and higher-order skills. Lengthy texts and unfamiliar vocabulary emerged as common barriers, often leading to disengagement or superficial understanding. Additionally, differences in motivation—ranging from genuine interest to complacency—further influenced performance. In response, the instructional approach was adjusted through differentiated tasks, scaffolded support, and strategic grouping. Tailoring text complexity and activities to students' proficiency levels allowed for more targeted skill development, while guided instruction proved especially beneficial for at-risk learners. Collaborative activities in later weeks fostered peer support, creativity, and active meaning-making, enabling students to articulate their understanding more confidently.

By the end of the intervention, notable improvements were observed in comprehension, participation, and self-awareness as readers. A key realization was that engagement alone is insufficient without structured support; effective reading instruction must balance student interest, appropriate challenge, and continuous guidance. Ultimately, the six-week experience underscored the importance of responsive teaching in developing both intrinsic motivation and functional literacy.

C. Data Collection

Data in this study were intentionally gathered from multiple qualitative sources—classroom observations, reflective journals, worksheets, and performance-based tasks—to provide a complete and more nuanced picture of students' reading development. Rather than relying on a single measure, these tools functioned like different lenses examining the same phenomenon. If worksheets revealed *what* students could answer, observations and journals helped explain *how* and *why* they arrived at those answers.

For instance, a student might correctly answer comprehension questions in a worksheet, suggesting proficiency. However, classroom observations could reveal hesitation, frequent rereading, or reliance on peers—signals of underlying difficulty. Similarly, reflective journals offered insight into students' internal experiences: their confidence, frustrations, or moments of realization. In this sense, the data collection process resembles assembling a puzzle; each piece alone is incomplete, but together they form a clearer image of the learner.

Performance-based tasks further deepened this understanding by requiring students to *apply* their comprehension in meaningful ways—through interpretation, creativity, and expression. These outputs demonstrated not just recall, but the ability to construct meaning, aligning with the concept of “constructively responsive reading” proposed by Michael Pressley and Peter Afflerbach.

This multi-source approach is also consistent with qualitative research principles, particularly triangulation, which strengthens the credibility of findings (Norman Denzin, 1978). By examining students' performance, behavior, and reflections simultaneously, the study was able to capture not only skill development but also shifts in motivation, engagement, and metacognitive awareness—key elements in becoming functional and independent readers.

Results and Discussion

Over the six-week intervention, what unfolded in the classroom was a gradual shift from surface-level engagement to *more* intentional and supported comprehension. The pre-intervention data, particularly the diagnostic test, already suggested a clear gap: while most students could read, many struggled with vocabulary, inference, and deeper meaning-making. This was further confirmed in Week 1. Although students were highly motivated by self-selected materials—webtoons, current events, and contemporary stories—their responses revealed limited understanding. For example, some misidentified central themes, while others could not clearly explain ideas due to unfamiliar vocabulary. This became the first critical incident: choice alone did not guarantee comprehension. The initial theory that intrinsic motivation through autonomy would drive understanding proved only partially effective in practice.

By Week 2, the intervention began to take a more structured form. Using differentiated tasks based on proficiency levels, I observed more targeted progress. Approaching-proficiency students showed improvement, with four out of six passing, while the at-risk learner demonstrated notable growth through guided support. However, another critical incident emerged: motivation and effort varied significantly across learners. Some proficient students became complacent, submitting minimal responses despite their ability, while others expressed confusion or disengagement. This revealed that ability does not always translate to effort, challenging the assumption that higher-level learners require less guidance.

Week 3 highlighted the importance of feedback and relevance. Through individual consultations, students openly shared their difficulties—long texts reduced focus, and mismatched interests affected engagement. Adjusting the material to include mixed genres (romance with mystery) resulted in improved scores, with proficient learners reaching up to 82% and one student advancing to a higher proficiency level. However, the at-risk learner, when left unguided, scored only 33%. This became another critical moment: scaffolding is not optional but essential, especially for struggling readers. The theory of gradually releasing responsibility had to be recalibrated to ensure consistent support.

Weeks 4 and 5 marked a turning point. Through collaborative and creative tasks such as drawing and group discussions, comprehension became more visible and shared. Students who previously struggled with verbal explanations were able to express understanding through visuals and peer interaction. Observations and outputs showed increased participation, clearer articulation of themes, and stronger connections to real-life contexts. This phase demonstrated that learning is not solely individual but also social, and that peer support can bridge comprehension gaps effectively.

By Week 6, when reflecting on both pre- and post-intervention data, a pattern of growth became evident. While initial results showed 55% at approaching proficiency and clear struggles with vocabulary and inference, later performances and classroom behaviors indicated improved confidence, better strategy use (e.g., context clues), and more active engagement. Students were no longer merely rereading texts passively; they were beginning to question, interpret, and connect ideas.

In sum, the theory-based plan—grounded in intrinsic motivation, differentiation, and metacognitive development—*survived*, but not without adaptation. The classroom reality revealed that motivation must be paired with structure, choice must be guided, and proficiency does not eliminate the need for support. The most significant realization was that effective reading instruction lies in balancing autonomy with scaffolding, and engagement with explicit skill-building.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Over the course of the six-week practicum, the classroom revealed a shifting balance between progress, struggle, and adaptation—for both the learners and myself as a facilitator. From my perspective, six weeks felt like a brief but intensive window to observe reading development and implement meaningful interventions. For the students, however, especially since the activities were not graded or tied to formal requirements, the experience stretched longer in perception, gradually revealing patterns of engagement, fatigue, and adjustment to the learning process.

As the sessions progressed toward the final weeks, I observed a mixed landscape of outcomes. Some learners demonstrated clear growth in comprehension and confidence, while others showed signs of complacency or inconsistent effort. A few, particularly those in the approaching proficiency and at-risk groups, continued to struggle with vocabulary and inferential thinking. At the same time, there was a visible desire among many students to participate meaningfully and keep up with their peers, even when the tasks became more demanding. These contrasting behaviors became one of the most important realizations of the intervention: improvement in reading is not linear, and emotional factors such as confidence, interest, and peer comparison significantly shape performance.

In response to these classroom realities, I made a deliberate adjustment to my instructional strategy by extending the use of drawing-based comprehension tasks into the final two weeks. Originally intended as a supplementary activity, drawing became a central mode of expression for understanding texts. This shift was driven by the observation that some learners struggled to articulate their comprehension through written or verbal means, but became more responsive when given visual outlets.

This approach is supported by the idea that visual representation deepens cognitive processing. As noted by Burnette (2025), illustrating a text encourages learners to slow down, attend to details, and actively reconstruct meaning. In this sense, drawing functions similarly to note-taking but goes further by transforming language into visual interpretation, requiring students to decide what is essential and how it should be represented. This aligns with findings that visual and creative tasks can strengthen comprehension by engaging multiple cognitive pathways.

Similarly, research by Rawat et al. (2012) emphasizes that drawing can serve as an alternative expressive tool for learners who struggle with traditional literacy tasks, while studies by Hibbing and Rankin-Erickson (2003), Hopperstad (2008), and Seglem and Witte (2009) highlight its motivational value in reading instruction. The National Science Teaching Association also supports the use of drawing as a reflective tool that allows learners to process and internalize information in personally meaningful ways.

What became most evident during this phase was that comprehension does not always surface through written answers alone. Some students who were quiet or limited in written expression were able to demonstrate clear understanding through their illustrations. These outputs—whether simple sketches or detailed scenes—revealed thought processes that might otherwise have gone unnoticed.

Ultimately, the most meaningful impact of the intervention was not only improved participation or modest gains in comprehension, but the recognition that students possess different pathways to understanding. By valuing both traditional and creative forms of response, I was able to foster a more inclusive learning environment where reading became less of a rigid academic task and more of a flexible act of meaning-making. In the end, I came to realize that comprehension is not always spoken or written—sometimes, it is seen, interpreted, and quietly expressed through creativity.

Given that six weeks is a relatively short period to meaningfully develop intrinsic motivation for reading and address persistent gaps in comprehension, it is recommended that drawing-based activities be complemented with additional strategies that help students experience reading as something engaging, purposeful, and less burdensome.

One effective approach is *visualization or mental imagery*, which encourages learners to form mental pictures of what they read. Research shows that students who actively engage in visualization tend to demonstrate stronger recall and comprehension compared to those who do not (Pressley, 1977). This strategy can be further supported by allowing students to use illustrations already present in texts or by encouraging them to sketch scenes when reading materials that lack visual support. In doing so, learners are guided to translate abstract language into concrete mental representations, strengthening both understanding and retention.

In addition, incorporating *predicting and questioning strategies* can further deepen engagement with texts. When students are encouraged to anticipate what may happen next or generate questions while reading, they become active participants in the meaning-making process rather than passive recipients of information. These strategies also open opportunities for collaborative discussion, where learners can share interpretations, challenge ideas, and build understanding collectively.

Taken together, these approaches—drawing, visualization, predicting, and questioning—create a more interactive reading environment. They help shift reading from a task-centered activity into a dynamic and reflective experience, supporting both comprehension and long-term engagement.

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Data Availability Statement

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analyzed in this study; all data used were obtained from previously published sources as cited in the reference list.

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Appendices

No appendices are attached to this study.